

# Recreation

The Northern Rockies has some of the most pristine and scenic wild lands in the United States. The area receives several million visitors in all seasons of the year because of its beauty and uncrowded backcountry (USDA FS 1998).

This analysis focuses on effects on winter recreation, because the alternatives would affect primarily winter activities.

Recreational facilities designed for summer use have very little effect on lynx (Ruediger et al. 2000, p 2-9). Developing or expanding sites such as developed campgrounds and amphitheaters would need to consider movement needs for lynx, but the amendment would not preclude their development or expansion.

## Special-use permits

People use public lands in many different ways. The agencies require specific approval for many of these uses. Normally public lands are not made available if needs can be met on nonfederal lands.

Each year, the FS and BLM receive thousands of applications from people who want to use public lands for agriculture, outfitting and guiding, recreation, cabins, lodges, ski areas, telecommunication, research, photography and video productions, water transmission lines and road and utility rights-of-way.

## *What is a special-use authorization?*

A special-use authorization is a legal document, such as a permit, lease or easement that allows occupancy, use, rights or privileges on NF or BLM land. The authorization is granted to named person(s) for a specific use of a certain piece of land for a given period.

## Travel plans

Management direction for winter recreation comes from the existing plans. Generally, they identify where motorized and non-motorized use may occur during what seasons, and they distribute lands into various allocations limiting and directing how it can be used.

About 55 percent of the lynx habitat in the amendment area is in non-development allocations, which include wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, proposed wilderness and roadless areas – see Table 3-1. Motorized use is not allowed in the more than five million wilderness-area acres of lynx habitat. Motorized winter recreation may be allowed in some roadless areas or wilderness study areas. FS and BLM units produce *access* and *travel guides* or *maps*. These maps usually include information about open and closed roads or trails and areas with travel restrictions.

## **Definitions**

### *Designated over-the-snow routes*

*Designated over-the-snow routes* are routes managed under permit, agreement or by the agency, where use is to some extent encouraged either by on-the-ground markings or by publication in brochures, recreation opportunity guides or maps (other than travel maps), or in electronic media produced or approved by the agency. Routes may be marked on the ground with blue or orange diamonds, bamboo wands, blazes or difficulty markers.

Both groomed and the routes identified in outfitter and guide permits are designated by definition.

### *Groomed routes*

*Groomed routes* are designated over-the-snow routes on which the snow surface is packed, leveled or scarified (with or without set tracks) by equipment towed behind a snowmobile or snow-cat. Businesses and groups do most of the grooming. Snowmobile or cross-country ski clubs often obtain permission through permits or agreements to groom certain winter trails. Snow roads maintained by permitted snow-cat tours are considered groomed routes.

### *Designated play areas*

*Designated play areas* are places specifically identified for winter recreation, such as tubing or snowmobiling, but not including developed ski areas.

### *Routes & areas open, but not designated*

Many routes and areas are identified on travel maps as open for winter use, but

their use is not encouraged in any way.

The routes are not marked on the ground; they are not identified in brochures or other media, except the travel plan map; they are not groomed; they are not under permit or agreement. Some of these routes and areas are routinely used; others are never accessed. The amendment does not apply to routes and areas open to winter use, but not designated.

### *Areas of consistent snow compaction*

*An area of consistent snow compaction* is a place generally covered with snow during winter that's used enough to compact the snow so that individual tracks are indistinguishable. In such places, compacted snow is evident most of the time, except immediately after snowfall, within 48 hours. Such places can be areas or linear routes.

Compaction may be caused by any human activity. Areas are generally found near snowmobile or cross-country ski routes, in the nearby openings, parks and meadows, or near ski huts, plowed roads or winter parking areas.

Examples include:

- ♦ Some of the consistently used routes that are open for public use, but not groomed or designated;
- ♦ Sledding or snow play areas close to plowed roads;
- ♦ Helicopter landing sites regularly used for heli-skiing;
- ♦ Ends of the snow roads used for snow-cat tours; and
- ♦ Small lakes with little wind scour where people go ice fishing regularly.

## Affected environment

### *Over-the-snow recreation*

Snowmobile use has increased on federal lands over the past several years. Nationally, snowmobile use grew 34 percent from 1988 to 1995 (USDA 1997), much faster than the overall population. Snowmobiling is the second most popular winter sport (Cordell 1999). Increased use has lead to increased demands for expanded routes.

Table 3-42 shows the trend in the number of registered snowmobiles in amendment area states. This information is useful in gauging the popularity of snowmobiling, an outdoor activity for which precise estimates of use over time are difficult to obtain. The data indicates an upward trend in all states.

Snowmobile technology has changed rapidly in recent years, making larger, more powerful and quieter machines available. These new machines let people access previously inaccessible backcountry.

Yellowstone National Park attracts thousands of winter visitors every year. Much of this use spills over onto adjacent NFs (BBER 1994; BBER 1998), particularly the Targhee and Gallatin NFs, which along with the Bridger-Teton NF reported the highest levels of snowmobiling in the amendment area.

### Routes & areas

People use snowmobiles, snow cats, snowshoes, cross-country skis and dog sleds on winter trails.

More than 15,000 miles of over-the-snow routes lie within the amendment area. About 13,000 miles of these trails are on public lands managed by the FS and BLM; about 8,000 miles are designated over-the-snow routes in lynx habitat. About 4,500 miles in lynx habitat are groomed in any year; the remaining 3,500 miles are designated, ungroomed routes. See Table 3-43 on the following page. Table K-8 in Appendix K contains information by unit.

**Table 3-42. Growth in number of snowmobiles registered by state**

	Registered snowmobiles		Average growth	
	1989 – 1991	2000 – 2001	Registered snowmobiles	State population
Idaho	22,300 in 1989	47,500 in 2000	7.1%	2.5%
Montana	15,100 in 1991	24,600 in 2001	5.0%	1.2%
Utah	12,800 in 1990	29,400 in 2001	7.9%	2.6%
Wyoming	15,300 in 1989	18,200 in 2000	1.6%	0.8%

Data from Idaho Department of Motorized Vehicles (2002); Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (Walker 2002); Utah State Parks & Recreation Department (Hayes 2002); and Wyoming State Parks & Trails Department (Rapp 2002)

**Table 3-43. Miles of designated & groomed winter routes & designated play areas**

	NF lands				BLM lands		totals
	Idaho	Montana	Utah	Wyoming	Idaho	Utah	
Miles designated over-the-snow routes	7,250 mi	4,225 mi	125 mi	1,775 mi	50 mi	0	13,425 mi
Miles designated over-the-snow routes in lynx habitat	4,075 mi	2,725 mi	125 mi	1,050 mi	25 mi	0	8,000 mi
Average miles groomed/year in lynx habitat	1,800 mi	1,680 mi	125 mi	875 mi	25 mi	0	4,500 mi
Designated play areas in lynx habitat	0	4 in 4,050 ac	0	0	0	0	4 in 4,050 ac

Miles and acres rounded to the nearest 10

In the year 2000, about 3,500 miles of snowmobile trails were groomed in Idaho and Montana, 2,100 miles in Wyoming and 120 miles in Utah – this includes routes outside federal lands, but within the amendment area perimeter (Buster, pers. com. & Cook, pers. com.).

Which routes are groomed changes from year to year depending on snow conditions and funding.

In the amendment area, money to pay for grooming snowmobile trails comes from state snowmobile registration funds and a small percentage of gasoline taxes. Wyoming gets some more money from winter trail-use fees.

Since 1990, the total miles of groomed snowmobile trails have remained fairly

stable, and for the next five years it's expected the trend will remain flat, because the amount of money available is not likely to increase substantially, although grooming costs are increasing (Buster, pers. com. & Cook, pers. com.).

#### Outfitter permits

A total of 359 permits or agreements authorize winter recreation in the amendment area – see Table 3-44. Of these, 338 – 94 percent – authorize activities in lynx habitat. See Table K-9 in Appendix K for a breakdown by unit.

The Idaho Panhandle and Targhee NFs in Idaho, the Gallatin, Lewis and Clark and Lolo NFs in Montana, and the Bighorn, Bridge-Teton and Shoshone NFs in Wyoming have the most permits and

**Table 3-44. Number of recreation special use permits & agreements**

	NF lands				BLM lands		totals
	Idaho	Montana	Utah	Wyoming	Idaho	Utah	
Recreation permits & agreements	735	1114	24	849	0	0	2722
Winter recreation permits & agreements	86	121	2	150	0	0	359
Winter recreation permits & agreements in lynx habitat	77 - 90%	115 - 95%	2 - 100%	144 - 96%	0	0	338 - 94%

agreements authorizing winter recreation in lynx habitat. The BLM has none.

Winter outfitters and guides provide a service to people who lack the skills or equipment to participate in winter activities, such as snowmobiling, cross-country or helicopter skiing, and late winter/early spring big game hunting. They provide jobs and income to many small rural western communities.

The number of outfitter and guide permits and their level of use has remained relatively steady over the past decade.

Generally, new permits or increases in service-days have been issued only when existing permits terminate, or when other outfitters decrease their permitted service-days.

A decade ago there was very little outfitted use during winter. Traditionally outfitters in the Northern Region offered hunting trips. Over the past five to ten years, public demands for family-oriented vacations have increased and the availability of game animals has decreased (Chris Ryan, pers. com.).

Outfitters have responded by diversifying their businesses and changing the season-of-use in their permits. This has caused an increase in outfitted snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, etc., during the last decade. However, the change in season-of-use has not resulted in major increases in overall outfitter-guide use.

### *Effects on over-the-snow recreation*

The Proposed Action and alternatives represent programmatic decisions;

therefore, they would have no direct effects. Any direct effects would occur later at the project level, when site-specific decisions were made. Any effects identified in this analysis would be indirect effects, which would occur later as an indirect result of this action.

### **Alternative A, no action**

Under the no-action alternative, winter access and use, and outfitter-guide operations on NF and BLM lands would be managed under existing plans. Decisions related to access and issuing new or existing permits, would continue to be made at the local level.

Grooming winter trails is likely to remain at current levels for at least the next five years because the amount of money available for grooming is not likely to increase substantially (Jeff Cook, pers. com.). To increase user satisfaction, grooming would need to increase later in the decade to meet the continuing increase in demand. If this happens, at the end of the decade, groomed routes in lynx habitat may increase above the current 4,500 miles.

The Gallatin, Targhee and Bridger-Teton NFs would continue to receive the most snowmobile use. Snowmobilers who visit Yellowstone National Park would continue to spend multiple days on adjacent NFs.

Public demand for outfitter services would continue to increase, and outfitter business growth would likely follow current trends. Outfitters could change their services toward winter use – they could groom more trails and increase the number of winter trips.

Figure 3-6 over the snow recreation  
is found in a separate pdf.

### Alternative B, the Proposed Action

Alternative B would add management direction for designated and groomed routes by including Objective HU O1 and Standard HU S1 – see Table 2-1.

Alternative B would allow increases in designated over-the-snow routes in an LAU, but only if the increases consolidate use and improve lynx habitat. The level of these designated routes would be maintained at about 8,000 miles – see Table 3-43. This would limit managers' flexibility when trying to accommodate increasing demands, because the limits for trail relocations or adjustments would be imposed *at a single LAU*, basically one watershed.

Grooming could expand on about 3,500 miles of designated ungroomed routes in lynx habitat. The Flathead, Gallatin, Targhee and Ashley NFs, and the Upper Columbia/Salmon unit of the BLM, all have only a limited ability to do more grooming because most of their designated trails are already groomed. Snowmobilers using Yellowstone Park tend to spill over on the adjacent Gallatin and Targhee NFs – see Appendix K.

New or expanded special use authorizations or agreements in lynx habitat would be limited to existing

designated over-the-snow routes and areas. This would affect all units in the amendment area, particularly the Gallatin, Idaho Panhandle, Targhee and Bighorn NFs, which have the most permitted outfitters.

Under Alternative B, use would likely increase on existing designated routes, changing user experience somewhat. Outside lynx habitat, the amendment would not limit anything.

### Alternatives C, D & E

As with Alternative B, Alternatives C and D include Objective HU O1, but change Standard HU S1. Standard HU S1 is changed to Guideline HU G11 in Alternative E.

Alternatives C, D and E would allow increases in designated over-the-snow routes if the increases consolidate use and improve lynx habitat *in a fixed combination of immediately adjacent LAUs*. This would give managers more flexibility when trying to accommodate changes to the trail system by giving them a larger land area to consider.

As with Alternative B, grooming could expand on designated over-the-snow routes, currently about 3,500 miles.

Alternatives C, D and E would increase

**Table 3-45. Designated over-the-snow routes available for future grooming**

	<u>Idaho</u>	<u>Montana</u>	<u>Utah</u>	<u>Wyoming</u>
Miles designated over-the-snow routes	7,250 mi	4,225 mi	125 mi	1,775 mi
Miles designated over-the-snow routes in lynx habitat	4,075 mi	2,725 mi	125 mi	1,050 mi
Average miles groomed per year in lynx habitat	1,800 mi	1,680 mi	125 mi	875 mi
Miles designated trails in lynx habitat that are not groomed	2,275 mi	1,050 mi	0	175 mi
Percent designated in lynx habitat that's not groomed	55%	39%	0%	16%

the areas where special use permits or authorizations could expand, into *areas of consistent snow compaction* that are not currently designated or groomed. These are places consistently used and compacted although use has not been encouraged. They are shown as open for winter recreation on travel maps. These areas would be identified on a baseline map of areas or routes consistently used in 1998, 1999 and 2000.

In effect, Alternatives C, D and E would allow grooming to expand

- ♦ On designated ungroomed routes;
  - ♦ When grooming consolidates use or improves lynx habitat; or
  - ♦ Into areas of consistent snow compaction established in the baseline.
- See Figure 3-6 on page 209.

Alternatives C, D and E would allow designated ungroomed routes to expand

- ♦ When designation consolidates use or improves lynx habitat; or
- ♦ Into areas of consistent snow compaction.

Alternative E does not prohibit expansion of grooming beyond these areas; however, such expansion is discouraged by guideline HU G11.

These alternatives could result in an increase in designated over-the-snow

routes, but should not result in more compacted snow since expansion would be into areas already compacted as established in the baseline. The newly designated routes could be groomed. Outside lynx habitat, the amendment would not limit anything.

### **Effects on routes & areas open, but not designated or groomed in lynx habitat**

Alternatives B, C, D and E apply only to designated over-the-snow routes. They do not restrict areas shown as open for winter use on travel maps where use is not encouraged. This amendment also would not affect existing local decisions about which areas are available for winter use as shown on travel maps. The amendment affects only decisions about designated routes inside lynx habitat.

### *Ski areas*

The amendment area contains 53 downhill and cross-country ski areas. Twenty-nine are in lynx habitat – see Table 3-46.

Downhill ski areas usually are highly developed recreation areas authorized by special use permits. Cross-country ski areas are usually less developed. In 1997, the FS conducted a nation-wide survey that found downhill ski visits increased by

**Table 3-46. Number of downhill & cross-country ski areas**

	NF lands				BLM lands		totals
	Idaho	Montana	Utah	Wyoming	Idaho	Utah	
Downhill and cross-country ski areas	6	23	0	21	3	0	53
Downhill ski areas in lynx habitat	3	11	0	4	0	0	18
Cross-country ski areas in lynx habitat	0	7	0	3	1	0	11
Acres of ski areas in lynx habitat	2,375 ac	13,860 ac	0	5,020 ac	8,000 ac	0	29,255 ac



## Recreation

Figure 3-7. Ski areas in the amendment area  
is found in a separate pdf. file

58 percent, an increase even more dramatic than snowmobiling (USDA 1997).

Snowboarding, the improvements in skis and success in the 2002 winter Olympics, have all contributed to the expanding popularity of skiing. Increased use results in increased demand for more and larger ski areas.

The Flathead, Bridger-Teton and Bighorn NFs have the most permitted ski areas in lynx habitat in the amendment area – see Figure 3-7. The Flathead, Bridger-Teton, Gallatin and Targhee NFs have the most skiers – significantly more than the other units – ranging from 175,000 to 433,000 visits per year. Table K-10 in Appendix K contains information by unit.

### *Effects on ski areas*

#### **Alternative A, no action**

Under the no-action alternative, developed ski areas would be managed under the existing plans.

#### **Alternatives, B, C, D & E**

There are no substantial differences in the effects on ski areas among Alternative B, C, D and E.

The amendment would have no effect on existing ski areas. The amendment would be applied only to the 12 ski areas

planning expansions and the one new ski area planned. See Table 3-47.

The action alternatives all include the same objectives for managing developed areas in lynx habitat, Objectives HU O1, HU O2, HU O3 and HU O4 – see Table 2-1 in Chapter 2. These objectives describe desired landscape conditions, such as making sure future developments provide lynx landscape connectivity.

Alternative B includes Standard HU S2, mandatory for ski areas, that says where needed, trails, access roads and lift termini must be located to maintain and provide lynx diurnal security habitat. This standard is dropped in Alternatives C, D and E, and the management direction added in Guideline HU G10. A guideline is usually followed, but may be deviated from if there is rationale. If diurnal security habitat is identified as a need, this direction could affect what areas are available for ski runs and increase costs.

The action alternatives all include Guidelines HU G1, HU G2 and HU G3 that could affect the timing of operations and where ski runs would be located.

The management direction in this amendment would not preclude further development, but would require that lynx habitat needs be considered in expansions or new ski areas.

**Table 3-47. Planned expansions or new ski areas during the next ten years**

	<u>NF lands</u>				<u>BLM lands</u>		<u>totals</u>
	<u>Idaho</u>	<u>Montana</u>	<u>Utah</u>	<u>Wyoming</u>	<u>Idaho</u>	<u>Utah</u>	
Ski areas planning expansion in lynx habitat	3	8	0	1	0	0	12
New ski areas planned in lynx habitat	0	1	0	0	0	0	1

## Cumulative effects

### **Alternative A, no action**

It's likely the demand for both developed and dispersed winter recreation will increase during the next decade. The past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions identified in Appendix L may limit where winter recreation activities may occur and expand.

There is some potential to expand use and maintain visitor satisfaction. Solutions to resolve conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users could include expanding use to places currently free from human-caused snow compaction, if allowed in existing plans.

### **Alternatives B, C, D & E**

Given the expected increase in demand for winter recreation, cumulatively the amendment, in addition to the past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions identified in Appendix L, may

affect the area available for snow-compacting winter recreation. This could result in changes in user experience.

The amendment would not change existing opportunities; however it's likely an increased number of people will be using existing areas. People would likely encounter more traffic, especially on groomed trails.

Grooming could increase on most units under Alternative B, and on all units under Alternatives C, D and E.

Designated ungroomed routes could not expand under Alternative B, but could expand into areas of consistent snow compaction under Alternatives C, D and E. Therefore, Alternatives C, D and E are likely to have less effect on user experience because more opportunities to meet increased demand are available.

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